

**The Oldest Known Pali Texts, 5th-6th
century;
Results of the Cambridge Symposium on
the Pyu Golden Pali Text from Śrī Kṣetra,
18-19 April 1995**

The Cambridge Symposium met to reassess Pali materials which were discovered long ago (in one case almost a century ago) and, in all but one very important case, had already been transliterated, translated and published. The principal subject of the Symposium was the Golden Pali Text of twenty leaves, jointly studied for the first time by specialists in Indian palaeography, (Pali, Sanskrit and Prakrit), Buddhist canonical texts, history of Buddhism and Buddhist and Burmese archaeology. The interplay of these specializations made it possible to establish the exceptional significance of the Golden Pali Text and also to draw attention to the other early Pali sources preserved at Śrī Kṣetra. Though the participants at some of the sessions of the Symposium brought wider interests to bear, it is appropriate to record here my deep appreciation of the highly specialized research contributions and cooperation of Harry Falk (F.U.Berlin), Oskar von Hinüber (Freiburg) and Richard Gombrich (Oxford) both before and during the Symposium.

Though this preliminary note may be amended by our further research, it is intended to alert Pali scholars to the main results of work carried out so far (both earlier and current), and to provide a note on the context in which the texts were found at the last and greatest of the Pyu capitals of Burma, Śrī Kṣetra. Śrī Kṣetra was established before or during the fourth century AD and sacked by the Nanzhao of Yunnan in 832 AD. The Golden Pali Text was found during excavations in the cool season 1926-7 inside the ancient urban area of Śrī Kṣetra, in a mound on

the land of a farmer named U Khin Ba. (The text is therefore sometimes referred to as the Khin Ba mound text). The mound contained the only undisturbed reliquary chamber in the whole of Śrī Kṣetra (an area of more than 20 sq. km). In the light of what follows about the palaeography of the Golden Pali Text, I note here that the influence of the Andhra school of Buddhist architecture is especially strong in Śrī Kṣetra and in the still older Buddhist monuments of Beikthano. The Khin Ba relic chamber was a square, brick-lined pit of c. 1 x 1 x 1 m, under a ruined brick stupa, at the centre of which stood the Great Silver Reliquary (whose newly deciphered Pali inscription is discussed below). Around it were carefully assembled a treasury of sacred objects, mainly in silver and gold, the Golden Pali Text being in the South-East corner of the chamber. Although many other relic chambers were discovered at Śrī Kṣetra, this was the only one to survive intact, and its contents exceeded - in number, quality of workmanship and concentration of precious metals and stones - even the relic chamber of the Bhaṭṭiprolu stupa in Andhra.

Pali Sources

The principal early Pali materials from Śrī Kṣetra are listed below, in their order of discovery (present whereabouts are given when known):

1. The **Maunggun Gold Plates** (2 leaves, 3 ll. of Pali on each), found by chance in 1897 at Lèbaw village 11.5 km (7 miles) South of the centre of Śrī Kṣetra; read, transcribed and translated by U Tun Nyein in *Epigraphia Indica*, 5, 1898, who considered the script corresponded to a large extent to that of the inscriptions of Pagan of the fourth and fifth century. In fact nothing originating at Pagan is of such antiquity. His dates were based on the chronologies given in the Burmese Chronicles, which are not easy to convert or interpret. U Tun Nyein correctly

identified the contents of both plates as versions of the well-known "Ye dhammā hetuppabhavā...".

Finot's reassessment of the Maunggun Gold Plates in 1912-13 makes leaf 1 the "ye dhammā," plus nineteen categories in numerical order, and leaf 2, praise of the *triratna* (*Journ. Asiat.*, XX, 1912 and XXI, 1913). Finot considered the script of the Maunggun Gold Plates closely related to the Kadamba script of the fifth century and dated them to the fifth-sixth century. The Kadamba script has been invoked in studies of the epigraphy of the Pyu ever since and been applied to their inscriptions in Pali, Sanskrit and their own language. The "Kadamba hypothesis" was finally laid to rest during the Cambridge Symposium. The Maunggun Gold Plates are in the British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections.

2. The **Bawbawgyi Stone Inscription**, two inscribed stone fragments found during clearance and conservation work on one of the terraces of the great Bawbawgyi stupa (the largest of three great Andhra-inspired cylindrical stupas of Śrī Kṣetra), in 1910-11, and a third the following year. Finot thought the Bawbawgyi Stone Inscription (which he erroneously termed "terra cotta") was an extract from the *Vibhanga*, and the script related to Kadamba, dated to the sixth century (*Journ. Asiat.*, XX, 1912).

3. The **Khin Ba Mound Golden Pali Text** (20 leaves, 3 ll. on each except leaf 19 with 4 ll. and leaf 20 with 2 ll.). Found in 1926-7 during archaeological excavations, it was one item in the relic chamber (inventory of treasure in Duroiselle, *ASI, AR 1926-7*, 1928). The Golden Pali Text was not transcribed, translated and annotated until twelve years later by U Lu Pe Win (Superintendent, Archaeological Survey of Burma), who considered the script of South Indian type of the

fifth century (*RS ASB 1938-9*, 12-22, 1940). The text is now kept in the strong-room of the Archaeological Department, Rangoon.

4. The **Great Silver Reliquary** of the Khin Ba Mound, has a 1 l. Pali inscription on its upper rim plus names of four Buddhas. It was briefly described in Duroiselle 1926-7, *op. cit.*, but the inscription was never read or published. It is on loan from the Archaeological Department to the National Museum, Rangoon.

5. The **Kyundawzu Gold Leaf**, single leaf; 2 ll. of Pali, was a chance find in the village of that name within the ancient outer walls of Śrī Kṣetra in 1929. It was read and published by Duroiselle (*ASI, AR*, 1928-9, 108, Pl. LI, a) as "iti pi so bhagavā arahaṃ...", as in the *Vinaya* and the *Sutta Piṭakas*.

Current Reappraisal

In completing my research for Vol. II *on The Ancient Pyu of Burma* (Stargardt, n.d.), I re-examined all the available records on archaeological excavation, monumental conservation, and epigraphy at the first millennium Pyu cities, Śrī Kṣetra and Halin (*cf.* Stargardt, 1990 repr. 1991, *The Ancient Pyu*, Vol.I, which mainly deals with the oldest Pyu site, Beikthano). The Pyu left a relatively large body of inscriptions, by South East Asian standards, in Pali, Sanskrit and Pyu, and they appear to have been early in adapting Indian scripts to their own, non-Indian language. It was clear that little note had been taken by Pali scholars of the existence of early canonical Pali texts at Śrī Kṣetra (an exception being the brief mention by von Hinüber 1981, of both the Maunggun Gold Plates and the Golden Pali Text). I therefore sent images, transcriptions and translations of the texts to Professors Gombrich, Falk and von Hinüber (in that chronological order) in 1994, during 1994-5 exchanged research data with them, and obtained new

photographs of the main texts either by photographing the objects myself or by purchase from the photographic archives of the Archaeological Department, Rangoon.

While it is true that without the 20-leaf Golden Pali Text, the other Pali texts from Śrī Kṣetra (published between 1898 and 1928) were either very short or fragmentary, or both, it is still surprising that the antiquity of their script and their status as true canonical Pali had received so little scholarly attention (a notable exception being Professor Niharranjan Ray). Historical circumstances at the time of the belated publication of the Golden Pali Text in the *Report of the Superintendent, Archaeological Survey of Burma*, Rangoon in 1940, meant that few copies found their way out of Burma at that time. In the post-war world, the Golden Pali Text remained little-known except to the specialists on Burma, most of whom were unaware that there was anything unusual about a Pali text of the fifth century. The Cambridge Symposium met to try to break down such disciplinary barriers and to look at the early Pali texts of Śrī Kṣetra as a unique body of surviving sources in pure Pali. Its results are summarized in the rest of this paper.

Current Research Results

The Golden Pali Text consists of twenty leaves of gold put together like a small palm-leaf Pali manuscript inside thick end-boards of gold. It is held together with thick gold wires. The leaves measure 16.5 x 3.1 cm; each contains three ll. of very clear, perfectly preserved script except for the last two leaves which have four and two lines, respectively. The leaves contain a total of eight excerpts of canonical Buddhist texts in a pure form of Pali. Below, I shall summarize the main opinions of U Lu Pe Win, (LPW 1940), who originally read and published the Golden Pali Text, and Professor Harry Falk (HF) in correspondence to me (in 1994-5), and in his papers at the Cambridge

Symposium (1995). I do not propose to present here HF's detailed arguments on which his opinions are based as they will appear in full in his own study of the Golden Pali Text and the Great Silver Reliquary, which is now in preparation for publication (see Bibliography, Falk forthcoming). I shall also draw upon the numerous and valuable observations of Professor Oskar von Hinüber and Professor Richard Gombrich during the Cambridge Symposium (OvH, RG).

The identifications made by U Lu Pe Win of the eight excerpts contained in the Golden Pali Text have been sustained by the Cambridge Symposium. Many of his notes of scribal error in the texts (LPW 1940, footnotes) are not considered significant errors by HF and OvH, while there are other scribal variants, slips or perhaps errors in the text that were not commented on by him. In some cases they throw an interesting light on the intellectual horizons of the monastic community, such as those variants that reveal a knowledge of Sanskrit grammatical rules.

Whereas LPW considered the text written in "the so-called Pyu script...similar to the Telegu-Canara alphabet of the Kadambas and early Chālukyas...about the fifth century," HF sees the closest parallels for the Golden Pali Text in the scripts employed in the Copper Plate Grants of the Pallavas of the fifth century. HF has made an extensive scrutiny of all the major *akṣara* forms in the Golden Pali Text and compared them with *akṣara* forms in use from 300-600 AD among the Pallavas, Śālaṅkāyanas, Gaṅgas and Kadambas. In HF's view, the similarities are strongest between the first two and definitely do not support the Kadamba hypothesis launched by Finot. No texts in Pali survive from either the Pallavas or the Śālaṅkāyanas, but in some of their copper plates up to c. the mid-fifth century a form of Prakrit was used (together with Sanskrit) that approaches Pali closely. After the mid-fifth century, Sanskrit tends to predominate. The arrangement of their texts, with 3 ll. per plate and numbered on the left, is similar to the Golden Pali Text.

The archaeological evidence of the oldest Pyu capital, Beikthano, shows that by the early- to mid-fourth century, Buddhism spread to Central Burma from the Ikṣvāku capital, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, on the Krishna River. By the mid- to late-fourth century, the Ikṣvākus had been conquered by the Pallavas. In Śrī Kṣetra, as already noted, Andhra traditions of Buddhism are evident in many ways.

It has never been noted before that many different monastic hands were involved in the composition of the Golden Pali Text (HF to JMS 4.10.94 and HF in the Cambridge Symposium). This very important discovery by HF provides insights into the mode of composition of the Golden Pali Text, and by extension, into monastic organization at Śrī Kṣetra during the fifth century. All the writing styles belong to an homogeneous South-East Indian tradition, with the striking exception of the author of the short second excerpt - squeezed into the end of the bottom line of leaf 5. His writing belongs to a North-West Indian tradition of the mid-fifth century, and his excerpt appears to be a very compressed paraphrase of *seven* kinds of *Vipassanāñāṇa*, instead of the eight kinds (*Visuddhimagga*, PTS ed. v.II, 639; LPW 1940, 13) or ten kinds (*Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*). The last excerpt, on leaf 20, is written in a more archaic form of the South-East Indian script than all the others, leading HF to consider whether this may have been inscribed by the oldest, and perhaps most senior, monk of the monastery. (For details of the other excerpts, see LPW 1940.)

As for the insights into the mode of composition and monastic organization that the Golden Pali Text provides, the very use of leaves of gold for the creation of this text suggests to me that the monastery concerned stood under royal patronage and was reputed for its Pali learning. Royal patronage is also indicated by the extraordinary concentration of gold and silver votive objects in the relic chamber. Finally, there is a dedicatory inscription in Pyu ending with two Sanskrit

royal titles (Śrī Prabhuvārma[n] and Śrī Prabhudevī), inscribed around the lower rim of the Great Silver Reliquary at the centre of this relic chamber.

The correlation between hands, excerpts and leaves in the GPT is complex. According to HF, in general the change from one hand to another occurs with each change of excerpt, but in a number of cases there is a change of hand within an excerpt and within a leaf - in two cases at least, the changeover occurs within a phrase of the text (for further discussions of the Golden Pali Text, including metric analyses, see HF forthcoming).

Excerpt 5 has particular interest for us. It is meant to list the fourteen kinds of wisdom (*ñāna*) of a Buddha according to the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, but the scribe has omitted two of them. Below I point out the consequences of this error (which was not noted by LPW).

The second major result of the Cambridge Symposium on early Pali sources at Śrī Kṣetra concerns the Pali inscription on the upper rim of Great Silver Reliquary. In his original excavation report of the Khin Ba Mound (Duroiselle 1926-7), Duroiselle mentioned the presence of a line of "bilingual Pyu-Pali" on the Great Silver Reliquary, "in early Telegu-Canarese script of South India, very closely allied to the Kadambas of Vanavasi and the Pallavas of Kancipuram." He thought it practically the same as the script of the Maunggun Gold Plates and the Bawbawgyi Stone Inscription and dated it to the sixth or early seventh century. He gave no reading of this inscription other than to note that the names of the four Buddhas: Koṇāgamana, Kakusandha, Kassapa, and Gotama appeared over the heads of the four Buddha figures spaced evenly around the cylinder of the reliquary.

In January 1994 and from February-March 1995, I was able to work in the Library of the Archaeology Department, Rangoon, on the photographic archives of Pyu materials and on Pyu objects on loan to the National Museum from the Archaeological Department. I should like to record here my gratitude to H.E. the Deputy-Minister of Culture, U Soe Nyunt (alias the poet Htila Sithu), the Director of the Department, U Nyunt Han, and its Librarian, Daw San San Maw, for permission to study, obtain and make photographs and for their most valuable cooperation during my work. The close-up photographs I made of the inscription around the upper rim of the Great Silver Reliquary were laid before the participants in the Cambridge Symposium a month after my return from Yangon in 1995. The photographs show that the names of the four Buddhas were engraved clearly into the silver above each head, with the result that the inscribed areas between those fixed points were at times very compressed indeed, even though the general appearance of the inscription is elegant and controlled. During the sessions of the Cambridge Symposium, Professor Gombrich was the first to recognise that the text mentioned the wisdom of the Buddha, and he and Professors von Hinüber and Falk went on to recreate the full text from the highly abbreviated forms inscribed on the rim. It was thus established that this was a purely Pali text (cf. Duroiselle's Pyu-Pali) and that it included the two *ñāna* omitted from excerpt 5 of the Golden Pali Text, as recorded above.

This fact provides extraordinary insights into the creation of the whole ritual assemblage contained in the relic chamber at the Khin Ba Mound, in which the Great Silver Reliquary and the Golden Pali Text were undoubtedly the most outstanding elements. Before the Golden Pali Text was closed and bound up in its golden wires, it must have been noticed that excerpt 5 was incomplete in two respects and therefore ritually imperfect. Those defects were made good by the representation on the upper rim of the Great Silver Reliquary, even if in abbreviated

form, of both the qualities of a Buddha's wisdom missing in the Golden Pali Text. The ritual completeness of the deposit was thus assured, and we have an extremely rare example of two canonical texts, one of which was composed in direct relation to, and after, the other. This is also born out by the character of the writing on the upper rim of the Great Silver Reliquary. Though closely related to that of the Golden Pali Text, it is not identical.

Conclusion

To summarize the provisional conclusions of the Cambridge Symposium, and especially those of HF, concerning the characteristics, dating, and closest Indian affinities of the five early Pali texts from Śrī Kṣetra enumerated at the beginning of this paper: the Golden Pali Text script forms display a considerable number of archaic features, including some that were common prior to 350 AD, others current in the first half of the fifth century and a few that came into use around the mid-fifth century. Within all the constraints that prudence dictates when it comes to dating on palaeographic grounds, it can be said that the Golden Pali Text should be dated to around the mid-or late fifth century. On the basis of certain unique *akṣaras* found in the Golden Pali Text, which reveal a further development in the Maunggun Gold Plates, it may be concluded that the Maunggun Gold Plates are later than the Golden Pali Text. HF has identified certain features of South-East Indian script adopted in the Maunggun Gold Plates script that indicate a sixth century date, but emphasizes other features which are unique. He suggests that both the Golden Pali Text and the Maunggun Gold Plates were composed in Burma, not India.

It was evident to me that the script on the upper rim of the Great Silver Reliquary is not identical to that of the Golden Pali Text, though it is closely related. The differences - most immediately evident in the

superscript of certain *akṣaras* - may (according to HF) be due to a different cultural influence within the East Coast region, or to a slightly later date of composition. The relationship already noted between the contents of the Golden Pali Text and the Pali inscription on the upper rim of the Great Silver Reliquary certainly prove that the latter was inscribed after the former. If the Golden Pali Text was inscribed locally, then so was the Great Silver Reliquary.

The Kyundawzu gold plate contains the same text as excerpt 8 of the Golden Pali Text. According to HF it is pure Pali (HF to JMS, 4.10.94). Provisionally, he considers it may be older than the Maunggun Gold Plates, and may be contemporary with the Golden Pali Text.

Thus all four gold and silver inscriptions in canonical Pali preserved at Śrī Kṣetra reveal palaeographical features relating to the East Coast scripts of southern India.

At Śrī Kṣetra there survived four early texts in pure canonical Pali inscribed on precious metals - gold and silver - and one on stone. The total of twenty-three leaves of precious metal that have survived in legible form are only a tiny fraction of what once existed at Śrī Kṣetra. Numerous passing references in the annual *Reports of the Superintendent, Archaeological Survey, Burma Circle*, mention chance finds of crumpled fragments of "silver and gold scrolls" with inscriptions. If the dates mentioned above are sustained by further research, then the Buddhist Pali texts from Śrī Kṣetra are far earlier than the previously known earliest palm leaf Ms. of Kathmandu - an isolated find dating to c. 850 AD - and they advance the written record of true Pali by some four hundred years. Unlike the Devnimori and Ratnagiri fragments of similar date (von Hinüber, 1985), the Śrī Kṣetra texts preserve a selection of "mainstream" Pali canonical literature in a

language and in recensions that do not differ significantly from those recorded in the Pali Text Society editions, themselves based on written sources of much later date. These facts are of the greatest significance in proving how scrupulously such texts were transmitted throughout the Buddhist world of the first and second millennia AD, whether by oral or written means.

One of the most important aspects of the Śrī Kṣetra Pali texts is that they together form a corpus belonging to the cultural context in which they were found. Three of the five elements of this corpus, the Golden Pali Text, the Great Silver Reliquary, and the Bawbawgyi Stone Inscription, possess a specific archaeological context. Taken together, as they should be, with the archaeological evidence of the monuments, the statuary and the votive tablets, these texts suggest to me that Pyu civilization at Śrī Kṣetra was the scene of a flourishing Buddhist culture by the fifth century, enjoying royal patronage, and supporting a monkhood well-versed not only in the Pali canon, but also possessing some knowledge of the Pāṇinian principles of Sanskrit grammar. The foundations of such Buddhist culture had already been laid in Beikthano in the fourth century AD, when the tradition of powerful Buddhist influences flowing into Burma from the Krishna River Valley began. During the fifth century at Śrī Kṣetra, these traditions widened to include the Pallavas and the Śālaṅkāyanas along the Godavari River Valley right up to Ter (Stargardt 1990, Ch. VI, VII).

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